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Artist Betty Tompkins Overlays Women's Bodies With With #MeToo Testimonies

By Anya Ventura for Hyperallergic June 23, 2021

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Tompkins unflinchingly looks at how female bodies are displayed, disciplined, and offered up to men.

LOS ANGELES — In 1969, [Betty Tompkins](#) began the *Fuck Paintings* series: gauzy grisaille close-ups of anatomical holes and crevices, graphic scenes of penetration and self-pleasure pared down to an almost mysterious formal beauty. Inspired by her husband's pornography collection, [the explicit paintings](#) — at one point censored by French customs officials — never became popular. Now, decades later, as cultural attitudes toward porn have softened, even as [censorship remains](#), Tompkins's art has found a fresh audience.

Several of the *Fuck, Sex, and Cunt Paintings*, alongside a new body of work created in 2019, *Women words*, are on display in the show [Some Sex, Lots of Talking](#) at Gavlak gallery in Los Angeles. The new series similarly relies on a Pop Art-style appropriation of found imagery, using black-and-white photographs by Weegee, Brassai, Richard Avedon, and Helmut Newton to rework representations of womanhood.

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The photographs depict midcentury scenes of performance and display: women in dressing rooms, loitering in front of lingerie shop windows, or kissing men in convertibles. And yet, by overlaying the women's bodies with fat pink script, Tompkins interrupts the spectacle. If the male gaze flattens the woman to an object, then the handwritten text composed of anonymous quotes from #MeToo testimonies, introduces a counter-narrative. It makes visible the ugly reality underpinning the feminine ideal so glossily captured by the male photographers. The thick, ungainly letters never cohere into words; instead, they run together, eluding legibility.

There is a raw, improvisational quality to *Women words* that is different from the careful realism of *Fuck Paintings*. The paper is torn from the pages of books, the edges still ragged. On the bottom, beneath the official captions, Tompkins has scrawled her titles in spidery pencil. While still repurposing images from patriarchal culture, in these works Tompkins messily annotates rather than meticulously reconstructs. But in both series, the female body is not pictured in its entirety — instead, it is blown up, decontextualized, overwritten, and obscured from view. The power of the images is the way in which they resist easy consumption.

In the decades since *Fuck Paintings* first appeared, our understanding of gender and sexuality has greatly expanded. Tompkins's new series sometimes feels like a dispatch from an earlier era — a page torn from John Berger's 1972 *Ways of Seeing* — and the well-rehearsed critiques of the second-wave apply. *Women words* largely depicts white women performing white womanhood, but the ways in which race, class, and other categories of identity may shape a different experience of the feminine remain untouched.

What stands out about Tompkins's work is still its unflinching look at how female bodies are displayed, disciplined, and offered up to men as a matter of course in a culture of misogyny — and how, despite whatever gains the women's movement brought us, for each smiling facade is still a story of harassment, discrimination, and abuse. For a previous piece, Tompkins invited members of the public [to send her common phrases they associated with women](#). Among the most popular words, she found, was cunt.

[Betty Tompkins: Some Sex, Lots of Talking](#) continues at GAVLAK Los Angeles (1700 S Santa Fe Ave #440, Downtown, Los Angeles) through August 14.

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